Social Classes

by Marta Harnecker

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1. Introduction

Marx died before he was able to write the chapter of Capital dedicated, precisely, to this topic. Many authors have tried to reconstruct it, but the methods used have not always been the best ones. Here we shall cite only one of them: Dahrendorf, who in his book *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*, tries to reconstruct the last chapter of Capital in the form of a compendium of quotations from different texts of Marx, which belonged to different periods of his theoretical development and which were articulated at different levels of abstraction. These are then arranged according to a pre-conceived scheme. His effort is valuable as a presentation of quotations, but as a contribution to the understanding of the Marxist "problematic" about social classes it is absolutely worthless.

The correct approach is not to construct the missing concepts through a compilation of quotations or a selection of the best of them, but to try to construct them through an understanding of the problematic on which they are based, which is found, fundamentally, in *Capital.* This is the approach that we have followed.

The concept of social class is a concept which can be defined on an abstract level: at the level of the mode of production, but for it to be an

instrument of political analysis it must be concretized, studying the new determinations which it acquires in a concrete social formation and in a given political conjuncture.

We shall first define the concept of social class at the level of the mode of production and then proceed to the particular determinations it acquires at the level of social formation and political conjuncture.

2. Social Classes and Mode of Production

In every mode of production in which relations of exploitation exist we find two antagonistic social groups: the exploiters and the exploited: slaves and masters, serfs and feudal lords, workers and bosses.

The existence of these classes or antagonistic groups was not discovered by Marx; many historians and economists had already spoken of them before him.

Marx wrote to J. Weydemeyer on March 5, 1852:

> . . . And now as to myself, no credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society, nor yet the struggle between them. Long before me bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this struggle of the classes, and bourgeois economists the economic anatomy of the classes. What I did that was new was to prove: 1) that the existence of classes is only bound up with particular historical phases in the development of production; 2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat; 3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society. [1]

Therefore Marx *did not discover* classes nor the class struggle. Economists of the early 19th century, like Smith and Ricardo, historians like Tierry, Guizot and Niebuhr had already treated this problem. Marx's point of departure was the point of arrival of those economists and historians.

In Marx's time historical knowledge, in its most advanced form; had already portrayed the succession of "civilizations, " of "political regimes, " of cultures, etc., as the result of the struggle between social groups: slaves and free citizens; patricians and plebeians; serfs and feudal landlords, etc.

Therefore, when Marx begins the *Communist Manifesto* with the celebrated phrase, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" he is only summarizing the conclusions which his predecessors had reached. These conclusions constitute the primary material on which he was to work theoretically in order to construct a scientific theory of the classes and their struggles.

If we return to the first contribution mentioned by Marx to

Wedemeyer, we can express it as a linking of the concept of class with the concept of mode of production (historical phases in the development of production).

In one of the texts most cited by Marxists, Lenin defines the social classes in the following manner:

> Classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated by law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labor, and consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it. Classes are groups of people one of which can appropriate the labor of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definite system of social economy.[2]

In many other texts Lenin emphasizes the relation which exists between one's situation in social production or in relation to the means of production and his/her social class.

The great contribution of Marxism to the study of social classes has been, precisely, to establish this relation.

The Marxist definition of social class would, therefore, be the following:

SOCIAL CLASSES *are antagonistic social groups in which one appropriates the labor of the other owing to the different places which they occupy in the economic structure of a given mode of production, places which are fundamentally determined by the specific form in which they are related to the means of production.*

This specific relation has classically been considered as a relation of ownership or non-ownership of the means of production, generally identifying *ownership* with effective *possession* of them. But we have already seen that both words are not the same, that ownership does not always coincide with effective possession. This confusion has its origin in *Capital* itself, since in the pre-monopolistic, capitalist mode of production studied by Marx both relations coincide in the same person. The capitalist is the *owner* of the means of production and "effectively" *possesses* them at the same time, since without his intervention or that of his delegate, the complex process of production cannot proceed. Nevertheless, in the only section of *Capital* where Marx refers to pre-capitalist forms of production, he distinguishes clearly these two relations: ownership and effective possession.

The correspondence or non-correspondence of these relations produces different effects on the different groups involved. Let us look at two types of effects which can be produced according to the form in

which they combine.

	CLASS A	CLASS B	EFFECT
Type I	ownership and effective possession of all the means of production.	non-ownership nor effective possession of them.	to produce their means of subsistence, class B must work for class A
Type II	ownership of the most important means of production: the land.	possession of land, ownership of the instruments of labor, control of the production process— effective possession.	to produce their means of sub-sistence class B does not need to work for class a, if they do it will be for extra-economic reasons.

It is precisely the non-correspondence between the relations of ownership and effective possession which make the intervention of extra-economic factors necessary in order to establish and maintain the relation of exploitation in the second situation.

> It is furthermore evident that in all forms in which the direct laborer remains the "possessor" of the means of production and labor conditions necessary for the production of his own means of subsistence, the property relationship must simultaneously appear as a direct relation of lordship and servitude, so that the direct producer is not free.... The direct producer, according to our assumption, is to be found here in possession of his own means of production, the necessary material labour conditions required for the realization of his labor and the production of his means of subsistence.... Under such conditions the surplus-labor for the nominal owner of the land can only be extorted from them by other than economic pressure, whatever the form assumed may be.[3]

The relations of production, therefore, are the most important element for defining social classes. The character of the relation between the exploited class and the exploiting class will be defined by the character of these relations of production.

The correspondence between legal ownership and real ownership of the means of production in the capitalist mode of production, which results in the complete separation of the workers from their means of production, is what obliges the workers to "voluntarily" offer their labor power to the capitalist in order to survive, making the intervention of extra-economic factors to produce these class relations theoretically unnecessary. This does not mean that these factors are completely

absent. We know that capitalist relations of production rest on a given juridical conception of ownership and of the labor contract and on the presence of an army ready to act in those moments when the class struggle sharply intensifies, as the history of bloody defeats of the workers' movement proves. To explain this we would say that, although the superstructural relations are present in capitalism, they only intervene when there is a threat against the system which otherwise tends to reproduce itself spontaneously in accord with its own economic laws.

Something quite different occurred in the feudal mode of production. Here the non-correspondence of the relations of legal ownership and effective possession determines that the propertied class (the landlords) must resort to force, tradition, religion, etc., to succeed in reproducing the relations of exploitation, to keep the serf subjected to its yoke. It is the character of the relations of production in the period of transition from capitalism to socialism that, while ownership of the principal means of production is in the hands of the proletarian state (that is, the proletariat as the class represented by the state), the "effective possession" of these means is still in the hands of those, who by their previous knowledge are able to operate them (ex-capitalists who have become administrators, the whole gamut of technicians of the former system, and later the new technicians, still brought up with the former mentality) which makes the intervention of extra-economic factors necessary: both political factors (this is one of the reasons for the dictatorship of the proletariat) and ideological factors, in order to struggle against the habits inherited from the old system. The extra-economic factors must intervene to prevent the labor of the workers from being monopolized, in one way or another, by the group that has effective possession of the means of production. Only the development of new production relations and forces (including the workers and their technical preparation) will permit the realization of a full possession of the means of production by the workers, and therefore the suppression of classes.

> Clearly, in order to abolish classes completely, it is not enough to overthrow the exploiters, the landowners and capitalists, not enough to abolish *their* rights of ownership; it is necessary also to abolish *all* private ownership of the means of production, it is necessary to abolish the distinction between town and country, as well as the distinction between manual workers and brain workers. This requires a very long period of time. In order to achieve this an enormous step forward must be taken in developing the productive forces; it is necessary to overcome the resistance (frequently passive, which is particularly stubborn and particularly difficult to overcome) of the numerous survivals of small-scale production; it is necessary to overcome the enormous force of habit and conservatism which are connected with these survivals. [4]

3. The Capitalist Mode of Production: Two or Three Classes?

In the previous section it was stated that only two antagonistic classes exist in every mode of production. How do we explain, then, that Marx, in referring to capitalism in the *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* and in various chapters of *Capital* speaks of three classes: capitalists, landlords, and workers?

To be able to respond to this question we must ask ourselves: at what level of abstraction was Marx speaking when he referred to these three classes? At the abstract level of the pure capitalist mode of production or at the more concrete level of a social formation dominated by capitalism?

If we rigorously study the texts, we realize that when Marx speaks of the "three classes" he always refers to "modern society," to "modern bourgeois society," or to "modern society based on the capitalist regime," and not to the capitalist mode of production.

On the other hand, if we examine carefully the chapters on ground rent which are found in section VI of *Capital* III and especially chapter XXXVII: "Introduction, " we see that Marx studied the problem of rent because "the monopoly of landed property is an historical premise and continues to remain the basis of the capitalist mode of production.. Therefore Marx was obligated to study rent because it constitutes a fundamental historical datum in the constitution of the capitalist mode of production and not because of some abstract logical necessity.

Lenin tells us that "logically we can quite easily imagine a purely capitalist organization of agriculture in which private property in land is entirely absent. . ." and therefore without landlords.[5]

Now let us look at the most explicit texts of Marx about the *problem of the three classes.*

> *Assuming the capitalist mode of production, then the capitalist is not only a necessary functionary, but the dominating functionary in production. The landowner, on the other hand, is quite superfluous in this mode of production. Its only requirement is that land should not be common property, that it should confront the working class as a condition of production, not belonging to it, and the purpose is completely fulfilled if it becomes state-property, i.e., if the state draws the rent. The landowner, such an important functionary in production in the ancient world and in the Middle Ages, is a useless superfetation in the industrial world.* The radical bourgeois (with an eye moreover to the suppression of all other taxes) therefore goes forward theoretically to a refutation of the private ownership of the land, which, in the form of state property, he would like to turn into the common property of the bourgeois class, of capital. But in practice he lacks the courage, since an attack on one form

> of property—a form of the private ownership of a condition of labour—might cast considerable doubts on the other form. Besides, the bourgeois has himself become an owner of land.[6]

This other quotation is even more clear.

> Capitalist production is based on the antithesis of two factors, materialised labour and living labour. Capitalist and wage-labourer are the sole functionaries and factors of production whose relationship and confrontation arise from the nature of the capitalist mode of production.
>
> The circumstances under which the capitalist has in turn to share a part of the surplus-labour or surplus-value which he has captured, with a third, non-working person, are only of secondary importance. It is also a fact of production, that, after the part of the value which is equal to constant capital is deducted, the *entire surplus-value passes straight from the hands of the worker to those of the capitalist*, with the exception of that part of the value of the product which is paid out as wages. The capitalist confronts the worker as the *direct* owner of the entire surplus-value, in whatever manner he may later be sharing it with the money-lending capitalist, landowner, etc. As James Mill observes, production could therefore continue undisturbed if the landed proprietor disappeared and the state took his place. He the private landowner—is not a necessary agent for capitalist production, although it does require that the land should belong to someone, so long as it is not the worker, but for instance, the state. *Far from being an error on the part of Ricardo etc., this reduction of the classes participating directly in production, hence also in the value produced and then in the products in which this value is embodied, to* capitalists and wage-labourers, *and the* exclusion of the landowners *(who only enter* post festum, *as a result of conditions of ownership of natural forces that have* not grown out *of the capitalist mode of production but have been* passed on *to it) is rooted in the nature of the* capitalist mode of production—*as distinct from the feudal, ancient etc. This reduction is an adequate theoretical expression of the capitalist mode of production.*[7]

These texts permit us to conclude that in the capitalist mode of production, as in every mode of production, there are only two fundamentally antagonistic classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. When Marx speaks of three classes, he was referring not to a pure mode of production but to a given social formation: modern, English society

and others in which the capitalist mode of production is dominant.

4. Social Classes and the Reproduction of the Mode of Production

In order to be able to satisfy the consumption needs of the people who live in a society, the production process of material goods cannot be paralyzed, nor can it be interrupted; it must continually reproduce itself. And this process tends to reproduce itself according to its mode of production, and it tends to reproduce itself without severing the social relations of production within which it functions. For this reason it is important to bring into play the concept of the reproduction of the mode of production in defining classes.

Let us look at what Marx says in reference to the capitalist mode of production:

> Capitalist production, therefore, of itself reproduces the separation between labor power and the means of labor. It thereby reproduces and perpetuates the condition for exploiting the laborer. It incessantly forces him to sell his labor power in order to live, and enables the capitalist to purchase labor power in order that he may enrich himself.... Capitalist production, therefore, under its aspect of a continuous connected process, of a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities, not only surplus value, but it also produces and reproduces the capitalist relation; on the one side the capitalist, on the other the wage laborer.[8]

But it is not enough to see the importance of reproduction in the determination of classes; it is necessary to study the specific form which this process of reproduction assumes according to the mode of production.

The reproduction of the capitalist mode of production, for example, not only implies the reproduction of its two social classes—capitalists and workers—but also their reproduction according to a determined tendency: the numerical strengthening of the working class by the growing proletarianization of those capitalists unable to withstand the competition, and, therefore, the numerical diminution of the capitalist class.

The study of the peasantry as a transitional class from precapitalist forms to capitalist forms shows us that, on the contrary, its tendency of development involves a drop in the number of peasants, some of whom come to form a part of the capitalist system of production.

It is this dynamic aspect of the functioning of classes, essential to Marxist theory, which many of its followers have forgotten, transforming the study of classes into a formal, static study.

5. Social Group, Class and Class Fraction

In the previous pages we have stated that there are only two antagonistic classes in every mode of production. We have shown, for example, that the landholding class is not, in the strict Marxist sense, a class of the capitalist mode of production.

When we say that in every mode of reproduction there are only two antagonistic classes do we mean that all the individuals living under a given mode of production must form part of one of the two antagonistic classes? Not at all. Not all the individuals of a society, nor even all the social groups, belong to a definite class.

Among all the social groups that exist in a society, only the groups that directly participate in the production process, forming antagonistic poles (exploiters and exploited), constitute social classes. Other groups exist which cannot be defined as social classes, either because at the level of production they represent intermediary groups between the two antagonistic classes, as is the case with technicians and administrators, or because they are not directly linked to production since they serve the institutions of the superstructure: professors, lawyers, functionaries of the state apparatus, etc.

On the other hand, one must not confuse the concept of class with the concept of class fraction, which designates those subgroups into which a class can be broken down. For example, the bourgeoisie as a class breaks down into the industrial bourgeoisie, the commercial bourgeoisie, and the financial bourgeoisie. What matters is to determine the scientific criterion which enables us to distinguish the different fractions within a given class.

In *Capital* Marx shows us the path to be followed to determining the fractions into which the classes of the capitalist mode of production can be divided.

In the same way that Marx passes from the abstract concept of surplus value to the more concrete concepts of industrial profit, commercial profit, and interest—which are only the developed forms of surplus value, that is, the forms in which it appears on a more concrete level of analysis of capital—we should pass from the two classes of the capitalist mode of production, considered at the level of the production process of surplus value—capitalists and workers—to the class fractions which arise in the circulation process of capital.

In reality, Marx pursues this method when he analyzes the developed forms of surplus value: to industrial profit corresponds the industrial bourgeoisie; to commercial profit, the commercial bourgeoisie; and to interest, the financial bourgeoisie.

Does the same thing occur with the analysis of the proletariat?

Marx is less explicit on this point; this has led many Marxist theoreticians to exclude from the concept of the proletariat people who

work in banks and commercial establishments, who are then considered as "employees" (a social group which would be embraced by the ambiguous concept of the "middle classes").

What is the basic argument of these Marxist theoreticians? According to them, a person can be considered a worker only if he *directly* produces surplus value, that is, a "productive" worker. Let us compare Marx's analysis to this argument. Why does he consider as fractions of the bourgeoisie representatives of commercial and financial capital *if they do not participate directly* in the extraction of surplus value but only in its realization, that is, in the sale of the products and the financial operations which enable the industrial capitalist to recoup, in the form of money the capital invested in the production process?

By the same logic that one has a "non-productive" bourgeoisie, that is, not directly linked to the production of surplus value—the commercial and financial bourgeoisies— one also has a "non-producing" proletariat corresponding to each of these fractions of the bourgeoisie. Let us look at what Marx says about the commercial wage earner.

> The question now arises: What about the commercial wage workers employed by the commercial capitalist..? In one respect, such a commercial employee is a wageworker like any other. In the first place, his labor power is bought with the variable capital of the merchant, not with the money expended as revenue, and consequently it is not bought for private service, but for the purpose of expanding the value of the capital advanced for it. In the second place, the value of his labor power, and thus his wages, are determined as those of other wage-workers, i.e., by the cost of production and reproduction of his specific labor power not by the product of his labor.
>
> However, we must make the same distinction between him and the wage-workers directly employed by industrial capital which exists between the industrial capital and merchant's capital, and thus between the industrial capitalist and the merchant. Since the merchant, as a mere agent of circulation, produces neither value nor surplus value it follows that the mercantile workers employed by him in these same functions cannot directly create surplus value for him.[9]

Finally let us observe the dynamic of the development of this fraction of the proletariat as the capitalist mode of production reproduces itself in expanded form.

> The commercial worker, in the strict sense of the term, belongs to the better-paid class of wage workers—to those whose labor is classed as skilled and stands above average labor. Yet the wage tends to fall, even in relation to average labor, with the

> advance of the capitalist mode of production. This is partly due to the division of labor in the office. . . . Secondly . . . the universality of public education enables capitalists to recruit such laborers from classes that formerly had no access to such trades and were accustomed to a lower standard of living. Moreover, this increases supply and hence competition. . . . The capitalist increases the number of these laborers whenever he has more value and profits to realize. The increase of this labor is always the result, never a cause of more surplus value.[10]

To accept the above idea implies questioning the theoretical utility which certain Marxists have attributed to the concept of productive labor in the definition of social classes. If this concept is employed in the sense in which Marx used it in certain analyses we would be led to the absurdity of including in the concept of the industrial proletariat workers ranging from the unskilled up to the manager of a company, that is, from direct workers who are exploited in the flesh to those indirect workers who are nothing more than representatives of the capitalist in the process of extracting surplus value.

Nonetheless, even if the concept of productive labor is not adequate to define the two antagonistic classes in the capitalist mode of production, it is useful, at the political level, to determine the class and the class fraction capable of carrying out and directing a socialist revolution. It is the productive proletariat, the proletariat, characteristic of advanced capitalism, which, because of its situation in production (the very organization of complex, collective labor, level of education, etc.), is the fraction of the proletariat best prepared to direct a socialist revolution, which is the vanguard of the proletariat.

6. Class Interest

Before moving to a more concrete level of analysis, to the level of the historically determined social formation, and studying, at this level, the new determinations which the concept of social class acquires there, we shall examine two concepts frequently used but rarely defined: the concept of class interest and of class consciousness.

Is class interest the totality of the spontaneous aspirations of a given social class? Can a strike which is limited to expressing immediate grievances, without ever calling into question the capitalist system, be considered the expression of the class interest of the proletariat?

To answer these questions we must first distinguish between two kinds of interests: immediate, spontaneous interests, and long-range strategic interests.

Immediate, spontaneous interests are the aspirations which classes or social groups manifest motivated by the current problems of their existence. They generally have the objective of securing a greater

immediate well-being, a larger share in the distribution of social wealth. For example: the immediate, spontaneous interest of a group of low-salaried workers is to get an increase in pay to compensate them for a rise in the cost of living. The immediate interest of a group of peasants is that their product be bought as a suitable price. In both cases it is a question of obtaining a remedy to a current ill, without seeking the deeper source of the problem: it is important to keep in mind that these immediate, spontaneous interests are always influenced by the ruling ideology; it is for this reason that they never come to call into question the system itself.

Thus the proletariat, left to its own immediate, spontaneous interests would not go beyond a purely reformist struggle: a struggle for better salaries, better housing, more time off, etc., aspirations with which there is nothing wrong, but which cannot become the final goal of the class struggle of the proletariat, since they do not call into question the system of exploitation itself.

> The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation, etc.[11]

Therefore:

> all worship of the spontaneity of the working class movement... means, quite independently of whether he who belittles that role desires it or not, a strengthening of the influence of bourgeois ideology upon the workers.[12]

Therefore, the immediate, spontaneous interests cannot be considered, in the strict sense, class interests.

What, then, is meant by class interests? Let us look at what Marx says in *The Holy Family:*

> It is not a question of what objective this proletarian or that occasionally raises, or even the proletariat in its entirety. Its objective and its historical action are manifest and irrevocably fixed by its very life situation, as it is for the entire organization of current bourgeois society.

Therefore, the long-range, strategic interests are the interests which arise from the very situation of each class in the economic structure of the society.

The long-range, strategic interest of the dominant class is to perpetuate its domination, that of the dominated class is to destroy the system of domination. The strategic interest of the proletariat, for

example, is to destroy the capitalist system of production, the origin of its exploited condition, destroying its foundation; the private ownership of the means of production.

It is important to point out that, owing to the deforming influence of the ruling ideology, consciousness of these long- range, strategic interests cannot arise in a spontaneous way; it is necessary that the members of the exploited classes learn to recognize them. The necessity of the penetration of Marxist-Leninist theory in the workers' movement stems, precisely, from the inability of the proletariat to recognize immediately its long-range, strategic interests.

> Social-Democracy is the combination of the working class movement and socialism. Its task is not to serve the working class movement passively at each of its separate stages, but to represent the interests of the movement as a whole, to point out to this movement its ultimate aim and its political tasks, and to safeguard its political and ideological independence. Isolated from Social- Democracy, the working class movement becomes petty and inevitably becomes bourgeois.[13]

Between the immediate, spontaneous interests and the strategic, long-range interests which reflect the dialectical duality of the short range objective and the final objective, there may be contradictions. For example, the attainment of high salaries, if it is not accompanied by correct ideological education, can serve to lull the proletariat to sleep, robbing it of its energy to struggle for its long-range, strategic interests, that is, the struggle for the destruction of the capitalist system and the establishment of the socialist system. The ruling classes are very well-adept at using these contradictions to perpetuate their rule.

We can conclude, from the above, that, in the rigorous sense, only the long-range, strategic interests represent true CLASS INTERESTS.

On the other hand, it is only by beginning with its immediate interests that we can succeed in making the proletariat understand its true class interests.

Lenin was very clear and precise on this point. In order to lead the proletariat in the political struggle against the servants of capital,

> it is necessary to link it with the definite interests of daily life . . . . But if these interests are buried under solely political demands, understandable only by the intellectuals, will this not represent a new retreat, a new limitation of the struggle to the intellectuals alone?[14]

Therefore, it is necessary to combat two errors: (1) To consider as *class interests* the immediate, spontaneous aspirations of a class; (2) To forget that it is *necessary to begin with the immediate interests* of a class to lead it to understand its true class interests.

7. Class Consciousness and Class Instinct

The other term that we should define is CLASS **CONSCIOUSNESS**.

Class consciousness should not be confused with the psychological consciousness of the individuals who comprise part of a given class. It is neither the sum nor the average of what the individuals of a given class think, feel, etc., at a given moment.

Class consciousness is directly linked to the concept of class interest.

An individual or a social group has class consciousness when it is conscious of its true class interests.

Class consciousness, therefore, is an objective datum related to an objective situation: the situation of each class in social production. This distinguishes it absolutely from empirical notions, from the psychologically recognizable and explicable notions which people construct from their life situation.

Now, there remains one final question: Is class consciousness something that arises spontaneously?

To respond to this question, we should distinguish first class consciousness and class instinct.

Every social class, owing to its objective situation within social production, tends to react in a typical manner, CLASS INSTINCT is precisely those unconscious sets of reactions, products of class situation, which are found at the base of all spontaneous expressions of class.

Class instinct is subjective and spontaneous, class consciousness objective and rational.

It is Lenin who most frequently employs the term class instinct.

> The peasantry has proletarian "instinct".... The workers instinctively aspire to socialism... it is the instinct of the exploited which brings them to fraternize at the front... etc.

Is there a direct step from instinct to consciousness? Clearly not, at least in what refers to the exploited classes of any mode of production.

The dominant ideology interposes itself between instinct and consciousness, perverting instinct and limiting it to those manifestations which do not call the system into question, and for this reason proletarian class consciousness is never the mere expression of its situation in the economic structure of society.

If the proletariat of a given country does not have class consciousness, but merely a trade unionist consciousness, this cannot be blamed exclusively on the lack of development of the objective conditions. Conditions will never be sufficiently developed for the proletariat to acquire by itself its class consciousness. The task of the workers' party consists precisely in "introducing" class consciousness into the proletariat, by demonstrating it and by helping the class to be

consistent with its true class interests.

8. Social Classes and Social Formation

CLASS STRUCTURE *is the relationship of the different classes and class fractions at different levels (economic, political, ideological) of a social formation.*

This class structure does not constitute a simple juxtaposition of the classes typical of each of the relations of production which are found in a social formation, but an original relationship (articulation) of these classes which are thus the subjects of long-range, strategy.

In this relationship (articulation) of a certain number of classes in a given social formation, we always find: one ruling class or class fraction and the ruled classes or class fractions.

Class structure at the level of the social formation implies, in addition to the determinations corresponding to the combination of the different relations of production which are the basis of the different antagonistic classes of each mode of production, other determinations which explain the rise of new classes of a transitory nature. For example, there is the peasantry (petty agricultural producers) which arises with the suppression of the regime of production based on serfdom and which tends to disappear as capitalism develops in the countryside, the majority being converted into an agricultural proletariat or emigrating to the city.

Therefore, in order to make a thorough analysis of the class structure of a given social formation, we must consider, in addition to the classes typical of the current relations of production, the transitional classes. At the same time we should not forget that each of these classes *undergoes modifications as a result of its relationship to the others,* and by playing a *dominant or subordinate role in this relationship.*

Let us apply what has been said to a social formation dominated by capitalism, that is, a social formation in which the capitalist system of production dominates at the level of the production of material goods, subordinating in one way or another the other co-existing modes of production of material goods as well as serving as the base of a political and ideological structure.

The ruling class in the capitalist mode of production becomes the class which dominates in the social formation. It sees to it that its class interests prevail over the interests of all the other classes. The very character of dominance produces new determinations which are not present at the level of the pure mode of production. This ruling class will have, in effect, to maintain relations of exploitation, collaboration, political struggle, etc., not only with the proletariat but also with the other classes of the social formation. This implies that it must have, in the very heart of the class structure, new instruments (economic, political, and ideological) which permit it to fortify and perpetuate its domination.

In a social formation dominated by capitalism, the ruling capitalist class must: reproduce the original relation of exploitation (capitalist/ proletariat); extend this domination to other classes or strata of the class structure (capitalist/ petty producer); prevent all interference by or make alliances with the old dominant class (landlords/capitalists).

It is this totality of relations which permit it to reproduce itself as a ruling class and develop its domination. Let us look at how these relations are manifested in the three levels of the social formation.

At the *economic level* at the effect of the market economy and the development of the productive forces within capitalist enterprises, the artisan, for example, tends to disappear, having afforded the capitalist a previous superexploitation. The peasantry, except for some few exceptions, tends to be transformed into an agricultural proletariat or to emigrate to the city, since their petty exploitation is no longer profitable in relation to large scale capitalist exploitation, etc.

On the *political level*, the necessity arises for a political intervention in order to reproduce the conditions of exploitation, something which formally, at the level of pure mode of production, did not appear to be necessary.

> The bourgeoisie, at its rise, want and use the power of the state to "regulate" wages, i.e., to force them within the limits suitable for surplus value making, to lengthen the work day and to keep the laborer himself in the normal degree of dependence.[15]

On the other hand, the domination of one class in the class structure does not always imply that this same class dominates politically. Sometimes displacements can be produced. A class which, by its situation in the economic structure, dominates in the class structure of a determined social formation can abandon political power to another class to conserve its domination in the economic structure, which in turn determines its domination in the social structure.

Marx analyzes this phenomenon in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.

> Thus, by now stigmatizing as *"socialistic"* what it had previously extolled as *"liberal, "* the bourgeoisie confesses that its own interests dictate that it should be delivered from the danger of its *own rule;* that, in order to restore tranquility in the country, its bourgeois parliament must, first of all, be given its quietus; that in order to preserve its social power intact, its political power must be broken; that the individual bourgeois can continue to exploit the other classes and to enjoy undisturbed property, family, religion and order only on condition that their class be condemned along with other classes to like political nullity; that in order to save its purse, it must

forfeit the crown.[16]

Finally, on the *ideological level*, the ideology of the ruling class tends to defend the social order, which is nothing more than the order which *has been established* to reproduce its rule. It is not uncommon to observe throughout history that ideas which had been rejected by the bourgeoisie in a given epoch, like birth control, are accepted and promulgated years later, to avoid the population explosion which, by increasing the number of people dissatisfied with the regime might even get to the point of endangering it.

9. Transitional Classes

TRANSITIONAL CLASSES *are the classes which only appear at the level of the social formation, as the effect of the disintegration of old relations of production and which tend to decompose as the new relations of production develop.*

The petty bourgeoisie, that is, independent, petty producer (artisan or peasant) is a typical example of a transitional class.

First, let us look at the agrarian petty bourgeoisie or the PEASANTRY in the strict sense.

Where historically there has existed a regime of production based on serfdom, the abolition of the bonds of servitude has liberated the old serfs, converting them into more or less independent petty producers. But the disappearance of serfdom does not happen by chance or the good will of the "lords," but by the pressure exerted by incipient capitalism, which, after a certain degree of urban development, begins to penetrate the countryside.

Capitalist penetration of the countryside produces a disintegrating effect on this class, which little by little is transformed into a rural proletariat and a rural bourgeoisie. The peasantry as a class, therefore, tends to disappear. Unable to compete with capitalist production in the market, due to its higher production costs, it either goes to ruin and is converted into a rural proletariat or emigrates to the city, except for some rare exceptions who manage to hold firm and become rich peasants, rising to the ranks of rural bourgeoisie.

This decomposition of the peasantry is an irreversible process so long as the capitalist laws of production dominate. No "desire" to maintain the petty producer can detain this process but measures can be taken to diminish its velocity.

The same thing happens with the small, independent producers, that is, these producers who are also the owners of their means of production. The impossibility of competing with the capitalist enterprises in the market reduces them, little by little, to the conditions of proletarians.

Therefore, the petty bourgeoisie (small peasant producers and

artisans who produce in a mercantile economic regime) does not exist as a class at the level of a pure mode of production, but appears as such at the level of the social formation, as a transitional class which arises from the disintegration of the relations of production based on serfdom and tends to disappear as the capitalist relations of production are extended.

The isolation of its members, due to their independent form of production, their transitory nature, and their position between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, determines their characteristics at the different levels of the social formation.

From the economic point of view, the petty bourgeoisie is an exploited class, dominated by the capitalist system, but precisely due to its isolation, caused by its very conditions of production, it is locked into this position and this determined form of exploitation. The petty bourgeoisie

> is not in a condition to understand the class character of this exploitation and of this oppression, which it suffers, often, no less than the proletariat; it is not in a condition to understand that the state in bourgeois society cannot help from being a class state.[17]

From an ideological point of view, because of his/her transitional nature, the petty producer has a dual situation; he/she is, on the one hand, a progressive element insofar as he/she represents liberation from the former regime of dependency, and on the other a reactionary element as he/she struggles to maintain his/her position as an independent, petty producer, posing obstacles to economic development.

The intermediate situation which he/she occupies, between bosses and workers, makes him/her fluctuate between the interests of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Moreover, this is the class most susceptible to the ruling ideology, with which it establishes certain relations that prevent it from perceiving the objective conditions of its servitude and of its future destruction.

To close, we quote this excellent passage from Lukacs about the petty bourgeoisie:

> This class (petty bourgeoisie) lives at least in part in the capitalist big city and every aspect of its existence is directly exposed to- the influence of capitalism. Hence it cannot possibly remain wholly unaffected by the *fact* of class conflict between bourgeoisie and proletariat. But as a 'transitional class in which the interests of two other classes become simultaneously blunted... ' it will imagine itself 'to be above all class antagonisms'. Accordingly it will search for ways whereby it will 'not indeed eliminate the two extremes of capital and wage labour, but will weaken their antagonism and

transform it into harmony'. In all decisions crucial for society its actions will be irrelevant and it will be forced to fight for both sides in turn but always without consciousness.[18]

10. Class Situation

In the previous pages we have examined the concept of social class at two different levels: at the level of the mode of production and at the level of the social formation, that is, of an historically determined society.

On both levels the classes are defined by their SITUATION in the social structure, a situation which depends on the specific relations which the social groups maintain with the means of production.

Class situation is, therefore, determined by the place which individuals occupy in the process of social production, CLASS SITUATION is the situation which individuals occupy in the social structure, which is determined, in the last instance, by the role which they play in the process of social production.

This concept should not be confused with the concept of CLASS ORIGIN, which does not refer to the current situation of the individual in the social structure, but to the class situation in which this individual was formed; for example, the class situation of his/her parents.

Finally, this concept of class situation should not be confused with the concept of CLASS POSITION, which we shall develop in the following section.

11. Social Classes and the Political Conjuncture

Our first stage was to define the social classes at the level of the mode of production; later we defined them at the level of the social formation. Now we must move to a more concrete level, the level of the POLITICAL CONJUNCTURE or "present moment," which constitutes the synthesis of all the contradictions of a given society in a given moment of its development. At this level new determinations come into play, overdetermining the classes defined above.

We shall analyze two of these determinations: the problem of CLASS POSITION and the difference between class and SOCIAL FORCE.

a) *Class Position*

When we studied the social classes at the level of the mode of production we saw that not all the individuals in a society belong to one of the two antagonistic classes, that social groups exist which cannot be defined as social classes either because they represent intermediate groups between the two antagonistic classes at the level of production or because they do not participate directly in production, being at the service of the institutions of the superstructure. These groups do not

constitute classes as such, but they tend to adopt positions which favor one or the other of the antagonistic classes.

On the other hand, not all the members of a class defend the interests of their class in a given political conjuncture. For example, the labor aristocracy, the privileged sector of the working class of the capitalist, imperialist countries in numerous political conjunctures, have not defended the interests of the working class, but the interests of the bourgeoisie.

Therefore, it is not enough to be a member of a class—to have a determined class situation—to adopt political attitudes consistent with that class situation.

CLASS POSITION *is the "taking of sides" by a class in a given political conjuncture.*

This "taking of sides" by a given class implies defending and struggling for its class interests, adopting "its point of view," "joining its ranks," "representing its interests."

Referring, for example, to "the middle strata, the small industrialist," the petty merchant, the artisan, the peasant, Marx states that "they are revolutionary only in view of their impending transfer into the proletariat;" thus they defend "not their present, but their future interests," they desert "their own standpoint to place themselves at that of the proletariat."

Lenin says, on the other hand, that it is not impossible that, under certain conditions, one or another stratum of working people could take its place at the side of the proletariat. Later he shows that the whole problem is to determine these conditions, and he considers that the words "to make their own the viewpoint of the proletariat" precisely express these conditions; that these words trace a clear line of demarcation between true Marxists and all other groups who claim to be socialists.

In another context, referring to intellectuals, Lenin says that every intellectual, though he works towards an objective analysis of reality "cannot fail to *take sides* with one side or another class once he/she has understood the relations that exist between them."

In a text about "The Tasks of the Revolutionary Youth" he makes it clear that students cannot be considered as a homogeneous whole, since they tend to reflect the interests of all classes and political groups in society; only some among them *"adopt a revolutionary position,* " dedicating themselves to the working class.

In *The 18th Brumaire of Louis* Bonaparte Marx speaks of the "representatives" of the petty bourgeoisie and the class itself, who

> According to their education and their individual position may be as far apart as heaven from earth. What makes them representatives of the petty bourgeoisie is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not

> get beyond in life, that they are consequently driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social position drive the latter practically. This is, in general, the relationship between the *political* and the *literary representatives* of a class and the class they represent.

Therefore, class position is a concept which belongs to the analysis of the political conjuncture. It is in the "current movement" of the political struggle that individuals group themselves into defined class positions. Obviously the basis of this class position is class situation, but it is not restricted to this. Isolated elements or groups belonging to other classes can join with and struggle for a class which is not their own.

Class situation creates, as we have seen, a class instinct which causes the members of that class to tend to take the side of the class to which they belong.

In order to arrive at a proletarian class position, the class instinct of a proletariat only needs to be educated; on the contrary, for the petty bourgeois intellectuals to succeed in reaching a proletarian class position, their class instinct must be revolutionized.

Attaining a proletarian class position requires a long process. Often petty bourgeois intellectuals join the proletarian party because they have become convinced of the truth and the political efficacy of Marxist analysis, but in difficult political conjunctures, they fall into petty bourgeois positions. That is why Marxism gives such profound importance to the social constitution of a proletarian party. The greater the number of members of the party with a proletarian class situation, the easier it will be to avoid leftist or rightist deviations which are the expression of petty bourgeois ideology in the ranks of the proletariat.

b) *Social Forces*

Much confusion about the concept of class comes from certain texts of Marx which have been interpreted in such a way as to deny the class character of a social group which, in spite of being in a determined situation in the economic structure of a social formation, still has not participated in a unified way in the political struggle.

In other texts Marx does not deny the class character of a group which has not participated in the political struggle, but he refers to it as "a class for itself," that is, a class which participates in the political struggle.

> Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The domination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself.[19]

It seems to us that the terminology employed by Lenin and Mao is

more adequate; they speak of *social class* when they are at the level of the mode of production and the social formation, and introduce the term SOCIAL FORCE to analyze the action of these classes at the level of the political conjuncture.

A social group can constitute a class and not a social force, as for example, the petty, peasant producers of certain countries.

On the other hand, some social groups can constitute a social force, as for example, revolutionary intellectuals.

In order for a class or social group to constitute a social force, it need not be organized into a political party proper, as apparently has been inferred from some texts of Marx. It is enough that its existence be reflected in some manner in the correlation of forces at the level of the conjuncture, that is, that it produces "pertinent effects" to use Poulantzas' terminology. This is the case of the small-holding peasants analyzed by Marx in *The 18th Brumaire.* In the concrete conjuncture of Bonapartism, Marx recognizes the role which the small-holding peasants have played in spite of their having neither their own organization nor their own ideology. They constitute a social force, since their existence as a class is reflected in that concrete conjuncture by the historical phenomenon of Bonapartism, which would not have existed, were it not for the small-holding peasants.

> Louis Bonaparte put himself forward as the representative of the small-holding peasants although he was, in reality, the 'representative' of the interests of the bourgeoisie. Yet it remains the case that the economic existence of the small-holding peasants is reflected, on the political level, by the 'pertinent effects' constituted by *the particular form of state* of Bonapartism as a historical phenomenon. We are faced here with a new but easily located element, i.e., the particular form of state in the Second Empire, a form which cannot be inserted in the framework of the preceding parliamentary state.[20]

If this had not occurred, if the existence of the peasantry as a class had not been reflected in the phenomenon of Bonapartism, this class doubtlessly would have had some kind of presence on the political level

> if only in the simple fact that the political organization of the other classes, as well as the institutions of the state, have to take into account the existence of the smallholding peasants, for example, in the case of suffrage. However, in this case, this presence neither constitutes a new element, nor has 'pertinent effects', but is only inserted as a variation into limits circumscribed by the pertinent effects of other elements, for example into the framework of constitutional democracy.[21]

In a revolutionary process it is necessary to distinguish three kinds

of forces:

the motor forces
the principal force
the directing force

The motor forces are constituted by the social groups which actively participate in the revolutionary process.

The principal force is constituted by the social group that represents the most numerous motor force.

The directing force is constituted by the social group which directs the revolutionary process. To direct the revolutionary process it is not necessary to be the most numerous motor force. What makes a directing force is not its members but its political role, that is, its capacity to take the initiative, formulate adequate goals at each stage and find the correct forms of leadership. In this way it gains the confidence of the revolutionary masses who then follow its directives without wavering.

The example of the Chinese Revolution illustrates very clearly these three types of forces. The motor forces were comprised by the peasantry, the proletariat, and the urban bourgeoisie; occasionally they succeeded in incorporating certain sectors of the national bourgeoisie. The principal force was, doubtlessly, the peasantry, and the proletariat, in spite of its small numbers, succeeded in making itself the directing force of the revolution, owing to the political role which it played in the Chinese Revolution.

It is very important not to confuse the principal force with the directing force of the revolution.

In certain Latin American countries, for example, the conditions of extreme misery of the peasantry, its great revolutionary potential and its heavy specific gravity within the total population of the country, without doubt convert it into the principal force of the revolution in those countries. But to state this is not to deny to the proletariat its leading role in the revolutionary process, since it is *objectively* the only class which by its class situation, that is, by its situation in social production, is capable of leading the revolutionary process to the end, to the suppression of every type of exploitation.

12. Conclusion: The Social Classes as "Bearers" of Determined Structures

After what has been said in the above sections we can understand the relationship which exists between the social structure and the social classes.

Social classes are not the *creative subjects* of social structures. They are, on the contrary, as Marx says, the "bearers" (Trager) of determined structures, the actors in a drama they have not written.

Let us consider for a moment this concept of "bearer" which is what Marx uses in *Capital* to describe the relation we wish to study here.

In the first place, we should note that the German word *Trager* has two very different meanings in English (as well as in Spanish and French): "support" and "bearer." The first term (support) indicates the idea of sustaining, of being the base of something, of serving as the support of something and in this sense Marx uses it when he states that "the material conditions are the supports (Trager) of the social relations."

The second term (bearer) means, on the contrary, to take on oneself, to bring with you, and in this sense Marx utilizes it when he states that "the capitalist is nothing more than capital personified, " that "he only acts in the process of production as the bearer (Trager) of capital. "

Marxism, by affirming that the *classes are the bearers of determined structures* rejects all voluntaristic conceptions about the social classes.

It is not the classes that *create* the structures. It is not enough, for example, that a class proposes to change a social structure for it to be able to do it. Although the proletariat might want to implant communism immediately after having destroyed capitalism, it could not do so, since this regime requires as a prior condition for its implantation a very advanced development of the productive forces.

But to state that it is not the classes which *create* the structures, is not to say that they cannot act on the structures, modifying them within certain limits. These limits depend on certain material conditions, which form the basis for the level of development reached by the productive forces. Without the active participation of the classes, the social structures tend to reproduce themselves, surmounting the crises provoked by their internal contradictions. Radical changes in the social structures only come about when the revolutionary classes are capable of taking advantage of the crises of the system to produce profound structural changes, that is, revolutionary changes. This is what explains the fundamental role which Marxism attributes to the class struggle as the motor of history.

Returning now to our definition, to say that the classes are the *bearers* of determined structures is the same as saying that they are the *effects* of these structures.

Thus we can come to define the social classes as the effects of the total social structure on the individuals who participate in one way or another in social production.

By this have we abandoned the concept of relations of production to define the classes?

We think this would be the case if we were to conceive of the total social structure as a simple relationship among levels (economic, ideological, and political), as does Poulantzas. In this case it is a theoretical impossibility to study this effect as an effect of a global structure and one is obliged to analyze it as a series of partial effects at the level of each regional structure.

On the other hand if the relationship between the different levels of the social structure is thought by beginning with the *relations of production* everything changes. For Marx these relations are what serve as the structuring center or matrix of the social whole, as we have seen from studying the concept of the mode of production. And for this reason it is these relations which are the basis for the constituting of social classes. To deny this, qualifying it as an economist deviation, is to deny the basic contribution of Marxism to the study of the social classes, and it is, therefore, a step backward in respect to Marxist thought.

Finally, we want to clarify that it is one thing to speak of the classes as *effects* of the social structure, which finally only means that they are fundamentally the effect of the relations of production, and another thing to speak of the *effects which the classes can produce* in the different levels of the society: ideological effects, political effects, or economic effects. When we refer to these effects, we are referring to the concrete practice of these classes. This practice will be studied in the next chapter.

13. Summary

In this chapter we have referred to the Marxist concept of social class. First we have defined it at the level of the mode of production in order to later examine the new determinations which it acquires at the level of the social formation and the political conjuncture. Lastly we have clarified the definition of the classes as "bearers" of determined structures.

We have looked at the following concepts of the general theory of historical materialism: *social class, class fraction, class interest, class consciousness, class instinct, class structure, transitional class, class situation, class position, social force, motor force, principal force, directing force.*

14. Questions

1. In what condition did Marx leave his studies of the social classes?
2. What is Marx's innovation with respect to the social classes?
3. How are the social classes defined at the level of the mode of production?
4. Why does Marx speak of three classes when he refers to the capitalist system?
5. How many classes exist in each mode of production?
6. What is the relation between the reproduction of the mode of production and the social classes?
7. Do all the individuals in a society belong to a given class?
8. What is a class fraction?

9. What is immediate, spontaneous interest?
10. What is class interest?
11. What is class consciousness?
12. What is class instinct?
13. Can the proletariat spontaneously acquire a proletarian class consciousness?
14. What is class structure?
15. Why do the social classes acquire new determinations at the level of the social formation? What kinds, for example?
16. What is a transitional class?
17. Can you explain why the word “bearer” is used to define the role of the classes?
18. What is class situation?
19. What is class position?
20. What is a social force?
21. What are the motor forces?
22. What is a principal force?
23. What is a directing force?
24. Does Marxism reduce the social classes to merely economic categories?
25. Why does Marx not define the social classes by using as criteria income differences?

15. Themes for Reflection

1. What prior knowledge is needed to make a scientific analysis of the social classes in Latin America?
2. Why is the criterion of greater or lesser exploitation not a Marxist criterion for the definition of the revolutionary possibilities of a class?
3. What are the effects of imperialist action on the Latin American class structure?

16. Notes

[1] Marx, Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Progress, 1965), p. 69.
[2] Lenin, *Collected Works,* vol. 29, p. 421.
[3] Marx, *Capital,* vol. Ill, pp. 790-91.
[4] Lenin, *Collected Works,* vol. 29, p. 421.
[5] *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 121.
[6] Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value,* Part II, pp. 44-45.
[7] *Ibid.,* pp. 152-53.
[8] Marx, *Capital,* vol. 1, pp. 541-2.
[9] *Ibid.,* vol. Ill, pp. 292-3.
[10] *Ibid.,* pp. 300-01.
[11] Lenin, *Collected Works,* vol. 5, p. 375.
[12] *Ibid.,* pp. 382-3.
[13] *Ibid.,* vol. 6, p. 368
[14] "What the 'Friends of the People' are and How They Fight the Social Democrats. "
[15] Marx, *Capital,* vol. I, p. 689
[16] Marx, Engels, *Selected Works* (FLPH. 1958), vol. 1, p. 288
[17] Lenin, "What the 'Friends of the People' are and How They Fight the Social Democrats."
[18] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (MIT, 1971), pp. 59-60
[19] Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy
[20] Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (NLB, 1973), p. 79
[21] *Ibid.,* p. 80